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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000418

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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03-09-14

TAGS: PGOV PINS PTER PHUM CE

SUBJECT: In meeting with Ambassador, PM Wickremesinghe optimistic about April 2 parliamentary election

Refs: Colombo 406, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Prime Minister Wickremesinghe intends to use the signed photo of his White House visit in his campaign. He hopes to win an absolute majority and will use it to push the President to return the powers she seized in November. He thinks the Election Commission is doing a good job. His media campaign will kick off next week. He is happy with the electoral assistance the U.S. plans to sponsor. He met with the Defense and Interior Secretaries soon after the inter-LTTE dispute broke out and is working to keep things calm. END
SUMMARY.

PM's CAMPAIGN GETTING INTO GEAR

12. (C) Ambassador called on Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe March 9. The PM's residence at Temple Trees was buzzing with campaign activities, with the normally-sleepy waiting room full of workers with folders marked "Campaign" and shouting into cell phones. The PM said that he has been suffering from a sore throat for the past few days, which has curtailed his activities, but that it is improving now. Ambassador presented the PM with photos signed by President Bush from the PM's November visit to the White House. The PM was extremely pleased, and immediately conferred with an aide on how he might use the photos in his campaign.

POST-ELECTION SCENARIOS

13. (C) Ambassador said the conventional wisdom was that the most likely election result would be a hung Parliament, with neither the PM's party nor the President's gaining an outright majority. How would the PM handle that situation? The PM said that his goal was to win an absolute majority, and that was what he was focusing on. He said that his media campaign would kick off next week, and he would also begin opinion polling then. Ambassador said that even if the PM won a majority, the structural problem of cohabitation would remain, with divided powers between the President and the PM. How would he deal with that? PM said that his view was that if he received a mandate from the people, he would insist that she hand back control of all three Ministries.

ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE

14. (SBU) Ambassador then briefed the PM on our plans for electoral assistance and observation. Ambassador said that we had been working with complementary programs from both the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), but that we had just heard that IRI had decided not to respond to the revised proposal, and so NDI would be the implementing partner. The PM said that NDI had a lot of experience working with the Election Commission and that IRI had focused more on working with the political parties, so in the current context the arrangement seemed logical. Ambassador told him that we would also be deploying teams of Embassy personnel around the country to observe the elections, and that we would not hesitate to speak up if we saw problems. PM said that was good. He also said that he was pleased with the work thus far of the Election Commissioner.

LTTE SITUATION

15. (C) Ambassador then asked about the situation in the East where LTTE rebel Karuna was defying Prabhakaran, and whether this would affect the election. PM said he did not think it would as long as large-scale fighting did not break out. Ambassador asked if the PM were in contact with the President or her people on this issue.

PM said that shortly after the issue erupted, he had called over Defense Secretary Cyril Herath and Interior Secretary M.N. Junaid to talk to them about keeping the

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situation calm. (Defense and Interior are two of the Ministries that the President took over in November.) He said that he might have talked to the President, but she was off campaigning. Ambassador said he was reassured by the fact that the two wings of the GSL were talking to each other.

16. (C) COMMENT: The energetic atmosphere around the PM was in stark contrast to the rather despondent air which seemed to permeate the UNP right after Parliament was dissolved. At present we have little gauge of public opinion, but Sri Lanka's proportional representation system will make it extremely hard for the PM's UNP party to win an outright majority. His stated intent, if he wins a clear majority, to insist that the President hand back the Defense Minister position, seems likely to set the country up for another battle of wills, since the President will claim constitutional mandate for holding onto the post. We are very pleased, however, to hear that the PM is working with the Defense and Interior Secretaries to keep the LTTE squabble from blowing up in their faces. END COMMENT.

17. (U) Minimize considered.

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